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Review Article

Seascapes and Mediterranean crossings*

Seascapes: maritime histories, littoral cultures, and transoceanic exchanges

Edited by Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. Pp. ix + 261. Hardback £35.50, ISBN 978-0-8248-3027-4.

Mediterranean crossings: the politics of an interrupted modernity

By Iain Chambers. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 181. Hardback £45.00, ISBN 978-08223-4126-0.

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Dame el mazál e ečame a la mar ('Wish me good luck and throw me into the sea') runs a Ladino saying that evokes the necessity as well as the predicament of sea travel in times past. It also alludes to thalassophobia. Until recently, the dominant research perspectives in the humanities and social sciences have been marked by a land-based bias and saltwater fear. The emergence of late of a maritime perspective and a 'new thalassology' beyond the narrow specializations of maritime history and anthropology points to the need for a reinvigorated dynamics in history, geography, anthropology, and area studies.[1] This need has been prompted by the increasing importance of global mobility and exchange, connectivity, and transnationalism as focal themes in the humanities and social sciences.[2]

The two books under review fit this trend, yet in widely divergent ways. The collection of fourteen essays in *Seascapes* is the result of a research conference held in 2003 in Washington, DC. All contributors are historians who are open to transregional and global history. They all take maritime perspectives on the past seriously but in varying degrees; only a few address in an explicit and comparative way the concept of seascape and its relation to land.

The book consists of four loosely connected parts. 'Constructs' deals with concepts critical for sea-oriented research, such as sea space, coast, island, and ship. 'Empires' examines ways in which imperial states tried to organize their power across water. 'Sociologies' goes into the nature of relationships on board and at port. The final part explores the dark maritime worlds of pirates, smugglers, and violence. Almost all the authors seem to be in favour of transcending the rigid boundaries of conventional eras and regions and pay special attention to transoceanic exchanges. *Seascapes* covers a vast time span, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century and includes the main basins of the world, with a slight bias towards the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

The volume is excellently introduced by the Stanford historian Kären Wigen, who has a reputation for transcending conventional divisions and

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1 See, for instance, the recently launched interdisciplinary journal *Maritime Studies* and the Centre for Maritime Research at the University of Amsterdam.

2 Pathbreaking publications have been, among others, Martin W. Lewis & Kären E. Wigen, *The myth of continents: a critique of meta geography*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997; the special issue 'Oceans connect', *The Geographical Review*, 89, 1999; and Philip E. Steinberg, *The social construction of the ocean*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

subdivisions in history and area studies. She makes a renewed and convincing plea for ocean-oriented research and maritime sociocultural studies, since approaching society and culture from the water prompts scholars to rethink concepts of time, space, and transformation. One of the central themes coming out of *Seascapes* is the notion of the sea as a heterotopia: in Wigen's words, 'marine-based social formations have long served as models of social change in landed societies' (p. 16). The topic of the sea as a site of intellection is unfortunately underrepresented in this collection and should have a prominent place on future research agendas.

John Gillis invites us to rethink early modern history from an island-centric approach. Inspired by Fernand Braudel and the Pacific scholar Epelì Hau`ofa, who pointed out that pre-colonial Polynesians saw their habitat as a sea of islands connected rather than divided by water, Gillis claims that 'something like a sea of islands existed in the Atlantic itself'(p. 21).[3] He calls this something 'Atlantic Oceania', in which islands are vital nodes of connectivity. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the division between land and sea became almost absolute and, consequently, islands were increasingly perceived as backward, bypassed by steam-powered ships. Islands began to sink into oblivion. One could add that, recently, the centrality of islands has more or less been restored by the growing global economic importance of mass tourism. In the second half of the twentieth century, insularity thus became an economic source for new reasons.

A second critical concept in ocean-oriented research is of course the ship as a complex cultural artefact in the sense proposed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai.[4] Hans Van Tilburg considers vessels as objects of exchange and traces the fascinating story of the introduction of Chinese junks in California and Japanese sampans in Hawai'i. He convincingly argues that this process of exchange involves the question of identity not only for sailor migrants but also for the ships themselves. Ships in fact go through the basic stages of a human rite of passage: they are named, baptized, and humanized and are the object of ritual and belief. Here is an obvious link to ethnography and archaeology, disciplines that are largely ignored in *Seascapes*.

Another opportunity for interdisciplinary cooperation is the perception and use of social space, an important theme in the social sciences since anthropologist Edward T. Hall coined the concept of proxemics.[5] The construction of sea space in Western formal discourses and informal practices involved increasing territorialization of seas and oceans. In a thought-provoking contribution on the political dimensions of maritime ideologies, Jennifer Gaynor traces the shifts of meaning in the Indonesian notion of archipelagic space, *nusantara*, from a term of reference for others outside Java to archipelagic expanse and finally to unitary national territory in independent Indonesia. More recently, the archipelago emerges as an Islamist political space. One would like to know more about this most recent shift in the meaning of *nusantara* and about how Indonesian 'sea people' themselves classify and use sea vis-à-vis land space. This would be an interesting project for an anthropologist.

The second part opens with a contribution by Carla Rahn Phillips on how Spain and Portugal organized their vast oceanic empires from 1580 to 1640. She argues that globalization 'began' (is there a beginning?) with the division of the non-European world into Portuguese and Spanish spheres of influence, which included the seaborne channels of exploration and communication. How could both powers manage such vast empires? To be sure, the Habsburg officials took a strong interest in the vessels used for transoceanic shipping, but this is not a sufficient answer to this tantalizing question. With so many Spanish and Portuguese subjects and their families involved in transoceanic communication, the author argues that citizens at home and in the empires were part of the same emotional, mental, and social space, even though they were thousands of kilometres apart. The Catholic faith served as a many-stranded bond across the oceans; as did kinship links and lavish periodic collective rituals.

Giancarlo Casale explores the Ottoman expansion into the waters and lands of the Indian Ocean, which closely resembles the European advances in the New World. He compares the state of medieval

3 Cf. P. D'Arcy, *The people of the sea: environment, identity, and history in Oceania*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006; Epelì Hau`ofa, *We are the ocean: selected works*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

4 *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

5 *The hidden dimension*, Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1966.

European and Islamic geographical knowledge of the Indian Ocean during the fifteenth century. Casale sees small innovations by Ottoman draftsmen to European-style portolan charts and concludes that European geographical and cartographical knowledge was inferior to that of its Islamic counterpart, despite Islam's failure to adopt the printing press. The author suggests that the development of Ottoman discovery literature, little of which survived, can be seen as part of a trans-Mediterranean intellectual division of labour, in which the task of compiling and publishing information gathered by Ottoman explorers and scholars was left to the superior printing centres of the Low Countries and Italy.

Chapters by Eliga Gould and Allan Karras deal with the legal and moral geography of European transoceanic expansion. Gould challenges Max Weber's claim that the essence of modern capitalism is (among other things) a commitment to the rule of law, and argues that the democratic revolutions in Europe and the United States were (also) rooted in maritime acts of plunder and piracy, and in irregular warfare and the slave trade. Karras claims, on the basis of evidence about large-scale contraband and corruption from Caribbean port towns, that Caribbean islanders slowly undermined the very foundations of the mercantilist legal regime.

'Sociologies' is a slightly misleading common denominator of three descriptive chapters dealing with some aspects of social formations on board and in the port towns.[6] The latter are in a sense amphibian forms of settlement that are integral to a seaward approach. Kerry Ward deals with The Cape of Good Hope and the refreshment post that developed into a major town during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Cape and port town were under the exclusive control of the Dutch East India Company and Holland. Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, it was the main crossroads for ships sailing the Oceans between Europe and Asia. The Dutch called Cape Town *De Indische Zeeherberg* ('Tavern of the Indian Ocean') and this 'Tavern' acquired a reputation for multiethnic cosmopolitanism. Unfortunately, there is little treatment in this chapter of the sociology of this port town, nor of the recently popular concept of cosmopolitanism.

Alan Cobley focuses on the role of the sea in Caribbean identity, and on slaves and free black seafarers in the eras of both slavery and emancipation. Slaves were an important source of labour, not only for merchant shipping but also for naval vessels. Seafaring provided blacks with economic opportunities and social freedom in a very limited sense. After emancipation, black seamen were employed in low-status jobs such as cabin boys and cooks; on steamships they were disproportionately employed as firemen and trimmers. The best opportunities for Afro-Caribbean seafarers were on tramp ships rather than on large passenger and cargo liners, whether sail or steam. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they married with local women in the major ports in the Americas, the British Isles, and Africa, placing them in the vanguard of the formation of an international working class. The same held true for the West Indian dockworkers in the Panama Canal Zone, the subject of the contribution by Risa Faussette. Between 1904 and 1914, when the construction of the Canal was completed, this zone absorbed more than 200,000 West Indians, mainly Jamaicans and Barbadians. This chapter suffers from an overdose of details and a lack of sociological analysis.

G. Balachandran writes about Indian seafarers between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s and their struggle for recognition and acceptance as seamen by the British labour unions, which persisted in regarding them as 'coolies'. This is one of the few contributions to *Seascapes* that contains personalized accounts, in this case of Indian seamen, many of whom jumped ship and established themselves ashore, working in factories and mining and turning to petty trade in London, the Midlands, northern England, and Scotland. Their 'subjectivities' were often fluid and blurred, more so than those of colonial workers, who are often seen as 'premodern'.

The final part has three essays on maritime subversion and predation. Writing on piracy in the medieval Mediterranean, Emily Sohmer Tai conceives of sea predation as a means of drawing, reinforcing, and contesting political boundaries. She points to a deep divergence between land-based political interests, keen to extend their control over the seas, and commercial interests, which tend to resist this territorialization. In fact, this is the wider conflict of interest between power centres in the interior, eager to extend and protect the integrity of their political and economic borders, wet ones

6 See, for a fine example of a sociological analysis, Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping anchor, setting sail: geographies of race in black Liverpool*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

included, and port towns, which throve on openness and connectivity.[7]

Peter Shapinsky shows in a refreshing contribution how, in politically decentralized and commercially blooming fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Japan, ocean-going families (often labelled sea-based outlaws) managed to establish suzerainty over the waters in the heart of the archipelago, the Inland Sea. These sea lords organized their maritime power base in forms of sea tenure: they established toll barriers in fortified choke points, managed ports, charged protection monies, and issued safe-passage flags. In so doing, they helped to build and manage commercial networks connecting Japan and Eurasia. Shapinsky places these Japanese 'pirates' in a global category of 'nonstate purveyors of nautical violence whose similarities in ecology ... transcended land-based cultural or political definitions' (p. 235). Indeed, his Japanese pirates are akin to the Barbary corsairs who dominated shipping lanes and coastal zones in the western Mediterranean during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Marcus Rediker, author of an influential piracy study,[8] closes the book by claiming that pirates and officials were caught in a reciprocal chain of terror. Ships and ports were not only sites of exchange but also places of bloody public ritual. This theatre of terror was a manifestation of class warfare where disciplinary brutality met with equally ritualized counterviolence. Rediker sees this bloody confrontation between state officials and pirates as part of a more pervasive 'violence of labour discipline as practiced by the ship captain as he moved the commodities that were the lifeblood of the capitalist world economy' (p. 246). To be sure, this modality of violence works differently from the violence in interpersonal relations and institutional arenas. It is part of the structural power addressed by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and punish* and explored in a comparative historical–anthropological framework by Eric R. Wolf.[9]

It remains to be seen whether the maritime scholarship represented in this collection can yield, as the editors hope, new constructs and paradigms that replace fixed categories 'in favour of discrepant temporalities and amphibious identities (both inside and outside modernity, as well as on and off the sea)' (p. 17). A precondition for achieving this goal seems to me to be a holistic approach to the sea as a Maussian *fait total social*.[10] *Seascapes* is a monodisciplinary book, in which the human, geographical, and cultural dimensions are either missing or not fully integrated into the historical perspective. For instance, it would have been illuminating to apply the concept of translocality to the fluid spaces of seas and oceans, to ships and ports in the past, and to the people who moved in and through these spaces, such as seamen, pirates, traders, colonists, and migrants.[11]

The title of Iain Chambers's book is promising, suggesting a sense of dynamism similar to *Seascapes*, albeit in the much more restricted setting of the Mediterranean. The author works as a professor of cultural and postcolonial studies in Naples, a city that figures in *Mediterranean crossings*. He seems to be unaware of the concept of translocality writing instead of the 'uprooted geography of a postcolonial sea' (p. 17). Following Braudel, Matvejević, and other scholars of the Mediterranean, Chambers embraces the notion of a 'multiple and mutable Mediterranean' (p. 23).

Mediterranean crossings and *Seascapes* are studies with completely different and even opposing approaches, styles, and methods. Chambers's book is a loose collection of notes, observations, bits of empirical information, and quotes or paraphrases from a wide range of sources. It is associative and at times poetic. The first chapter, 'Many voices', sets the tone for the rest of the book: it begins with a lengthy quote from a Neapolitan chef, oddly enough one of the rare Mediterranean voices in this book. The other voices belong to heroes of cultural, postcolonial, and literary studies, such as

7 See H. Driessen, 'Mediterranean port cities: cosmopolitanism reconsidered', *History and Anthropology*, 16, 1, 2005, pp. 129–41.

8 *Between the devil and the deep blue sea: merchant seamen, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700–1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

9 *Envisioning power: ideologies of dominance and crisis*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

10 See the attempt by Alain Corbin and Hélène Richard, eds., *La Mer: terreur et fascination*, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Seuil, 2004.

11 See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, 'Sovereignity without territoriality: notes from a postnational geography', in Setha Low and Denise Lawrence Zúñiga, eds., *The anthropology of space and place: locating culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 337–49.

Gilles Deleuze, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Michel de Certeau, and writers such as the Jewish poet from Egypt, Edmond Jabès, and the French-Algerian Albert Camus.

In Chambers's view, the Mediterranean Sea is a sea of 'passages, cultural crossovers, contaminations, creolizations, and uneven historical memories' (p. 28). The remaining chapters are devoted to examples of such uncertain phenomena and mainly consist of brief ramblings from one subject to another (music, film, language, art), from one book to another (among many others, Homer's *Odyssey*, Ghosh's *In an antique land*, Vico's *Principe d'una scienza nuova dintorno alla natura delle nazioni*, Roden's *A book of Middle Eastern food*, and Agamben's *Homo Sacer*). The book has a political undertone critical of the state, borders, and restrictions on immigration. *Mediterranean crossings* is indeed an intellectual 'passage' but, unfortunately, one without a detached and clear sense of direction and guidance.

Perhaps the most coherent chapter is 'Naples: a porous modernity', a collage of personal impressions and fragments from varied sources on Neapolitan history and society. There are some interesting observations on, for instance, the immigration into Naples of female domestic servants from Cape Verde, Somalia, the Philippines, Ukraine, and Sri Lanka, and of male labour from West Africa and China employed in agriculture, street vending, and the semi-clandestine clothing industry in the satellite towns at the foot of the Vesuvius. Also on Naples as a minor port and commercial centre compared to Genoa and Venice, mainly serving for the importation of foodstuffs from Sicily and Puglia to feed its metropolitan population and immediate hinterland (at the end of the sixteenth century, Naples was – with Paris – the biggest city in Christian Europe). One would wish that such observations were contextualized and elaborated with empirical details.

Mediterranean crossings is an example of the postmodern variety of quasi-interdisciplinary studies that hardly adds anything of empirical or theoretical importance to the separate disciplines of history, anthropology, geography, or sociology. It lacks the firm empirical ground and logical consistency of *Seascapes*. Moreover, it is ill-informed about what these disciplines have achieved with regard to the Mediterranean, as well as ignorant about nascent approaches such as the sea-oriented approach discussed above.